

2000

A Guide to Writing Letters to Public Officials: Contributing to Important Decisions Affecting You and Others

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A Guide to Writing Letters to Public Officials: Contributing to Important Decisions Affecting You and Others

A well-written personal letter may be the most effective way to communicate with public officials. They want to know how their constituents feel about issues, especially when those issues involve decisions by elected officials.

Public officials usually know what lobbying groups are saying about an issue, but often they do not understand how a particular decision affects you. A well-written letter describing your experiences, observations, and opinions may change an official's mind.

The same guidelines are also useful for writing to private officials such as business owners, executives of groups like the chamber of commerce, or presidents of corporate boards of directors. These individuals can also make decisions that affect you or the public.

You can write two types of letters – positive or negative. A positive letter explains why a decision is or would be good. You should write positive letters about favorable decisions. A negative letter explains your opposition to a pending decision. Writing effective letters builds your reputation as a thoughtful person in the eyes of officials and makes your criticisms more influential.

This guide is designed to help you prepare effective letters. It includes examples of a positive letter and one that criticizes a pending decision. Specific steps for writing an effective letter are also described. Then you will write your own letter.

The following letter supports a proposed policy change.

Honorable Mayor Robert A. Hersch,

I am an American veteran with a disability who uses a wheelchair. Despite my disability, I drive my own van, as many other disabled citizens do. So, as you may imagine, I was pleased to hear that the City Commission was considering a proposal to strengthen the handicapped parking ordinance. The new ordinance is designed to help keep the designated handicapped parking space on both public

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and private property open for use by disabled persons. The proposal has already led to publicity about the problems citizens with disabilities have getting a convenient place to park. This has increased the sensitivity of the general public. Further, an occasional \$25 ticket ought to keep those important spaces open for those who need them.

For me, this new ordinance will mean that I can drive anywhere in town I need to go and have a fair chance of being able to park and go in. The latest census statistics indicate there are over 1,200 people in our community who are similarly affected.

Your votes on the architectural accessibility ordinance in the past have demonstrated your support for disability issues. I urge you to vote in favor of the new parking ordinance. If there is any way I might be of assistance, please don't hesitate to call on me. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,
Gary Hardage, address

The following letter opposes a proposed zoning change.

Honorable Mayor Robert A. Hersch,

I own a home and live in the west side of town. I am writing to express my concern over the proposed down-zoning of my neighborhood. It is my understanding that this new zoning ordinance will bring more people into the neighborhood and force property values down. Reducing the zoning level will allow developers to build apartment buildings and stores in among the older family homes already here. This will clearly bring more people into the neighborhood – increasing traffic, noise and crime.

The value of my house is its value as life insurance for my children and my retirement fund. If it declines in value, so does the security of my family. In addition, more crowding, more traffic, more noise and crime would be extremely

upsetting to the many elderly residents in the neighborhood.

You have always been sensitive to the preservation of the unique character of our neighborhoods and maintaining the family strengths of our community. I urge you to vote against this zoning issue. Zoning in our neighborhood should remain as it is. Those wishing to build apartments, rather than new homes, have many alternatives more appropriate than this from which to choose.

If I can help in any way to defeat this proposal, let me know. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Mary K. Steiner, address

Preparing Your Letter

The following guidelines are offered to help you write an effective letter. Keep in mind that you can write a positive letter that explains why a decision is or would be good (a recommended practice after a favorable decision) or a negative letter that explains your opposition to a pending decision. Use the blank spaces to write what you want to say in your letter.

Decide to whom you will write. Get the name, title and address of the highest official who has authority and responsibility for a decision. Example: The city's mayor is the highest official with authority over zoning issues or parking ordinances, such as the ones described in the sample letters. A corporation's executive president might have the final say over whether a new business office is accessible to disabled persons. A state human service agency's director might be responsible for the way services are provided.

Decide on the letter's tone: will it be positive or negative? A positive letter would explain why a decision is or would be good. A negative letter would explain your opposition to a pending decision.

Open the letter. If you are writing to an elected official, show respect for the position by using the “Honorable,” the title of the office, and the official’s full name. In any other letter, use the familiar term “Dear,” the title Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Dr., and the official’s full name. Examples: “Honorable Mayor Robert A. Hersch,” or “Dear Dr. Frederick Marsh,”.

Write something about yourself. Example: “I am an art lover. However, I have never been able to get my wheelchair into the city Art Museum.”

Tell why you are writing the letter. State why you are concerned or pleased that a particular decision is being considered. Example: “I am writing to let you know how pleased I am that you are considering using revenue-sharing funds to make the museum accessible.”

Summarize your understanding of the issue (decision) being considered. State the general impact you expect, if a particular decision is made. Example: “I believe that this change will make it easier for many people in our community to enjoy art.

Tell why you think a decision should occur. Describe in detail why you feel the decision made will lead to the impact you foresee. Example: “The proposed installation of wheelchair ramps for the front entrance of the museum will make it possible for me to get into the building to enjoy the exhibits and plays.”

Tell what any changes mean to you personally. Describe the decision’s positive or negative effects for you. Example: “These changes will make me feel that I am truly a part of our community.”

If you think others will also be affected, identify them. Tell the official who and how many other people will be affected in the same way. Example: “The latest census statistics indicated there are over 1,200 people in our community with mobility impairments. All of these individuals are similarly affected.”

Acknowledge past support. Tell the official

with mobility impairments. All of these individuals are similarly affected.”

Acknowledge past support. Tell the official about appropriate actions and decisions she or he has made in the past. Example: “You have always been sensitive to the needs of all community residents.”

Describe what action you hope the official will take. State specifically what action you hope the official will take – what you would do in his or her place. Example: “I urge you to vote in favor of using revenue-sharing funds to improve accessibility.”

If you have time and you are committed, ask how you can help. Tell the official that you would be willing to volunteer your help. Example: “If there is any way I might be of assistance, please don’t hesitate to call on me.”

Close your letter. Thank the official. Example: “Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this important matter.” You might write:

Sign the letter. Sign your full name and write your address.

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